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Chemical Time Bombs

A small stretch of northern New Jersey running between Newark Airport and Port Elizabeth has been called the most dangerous two miles in America by terrorism experts, and for good reason. It holds a chlorine plant that could threaten some 12 million people, and it has more than a dozen other chemical plants, two port complexes and a plethora of oil storage tanks, refineries and pipelines, intermingled with rail and highway links that provide easy access to more than 100 potential targets in all.

Federal, state and local officials have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into this lethal landscape to erect gates, roadblocks and security cameras and beef up patrols and surveillance. Yet as an article in Monday's Times by David Kocieniewski makes clear, the area remains frighteningly vulnerable. At the chlorine plant, trucks and cars drive by a scant 100 feet from storage tanks. A Times reporter and photographer found the plant only loosely guarded as they drove back and forth for five minutes snapping photos.

Their experience echoed an incident last year when Senator Jon Corzine, a New Jersey Democrat, went with a "60 Minutes" crew to a chemical plant outside Pittsburgh. They had no trouble entering and gaining access to deadly chemicals like anhydrous ammonia and boron trifluoride. This sort of lax security is all too common, and it makes these plants inviting terrorist targets. The Environmental Protection Agency has identified 123 chemical plants in 24 states where a terrorist act or accident could threaten a million or more people. Yet shockingly little has been done to upgrade their defenses.

Senator Corzine's persistent efforts to upgrade chemical plant security have been thwarted by the chemical industry and by the Bush administration's lack of support. He is now working on a new bill, in collaboration with Senators Susan Collins and Joseph Lieberman, that is likely to make some concessions to the chemical industry to improve its chances of passage. If Congress and the White House are serious about protecting the nation, they will make sure that his bill becomes law in the strongest possible form. There is an urgent need for greater security at the plant sites. The industry should also be required to replace dangerous chemicals with safer alternatives. These steps may sound like common sense, but they have run into entrenched political opposition. The Bush administration's antiregulatory philosophy makes it reluctant to impose rules on private industry. And the chemical industry, a major campaign donor, seems intent on not spending the money that a strong safety law would cost it. Christie Whitman, the former E.P.A. administrator, became so frustrated by her inability to make any progress that she asked to be relieved of responsibility for chemical plant safety.

There may be room for compromise in a new bill. Plants in low-population areas might be exempted from the need to replace dangerous chemicals with substitutes that would be safer but more costly. The industry might also be granted leeway to develop its own safety codes. But unless those rules are tougher than the government's would be, they should not be a substitute.

Chemical plant safety has had a troubled history, but there is reason for cautious optimism. In the Senate, jurisdiction has shifted to the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, where the chairwoman, Senator Collins, a Maine Republican, seems serious about getting a good bill passed. Michael Chertoff, the new homeland security secretary, also appears committed to making chemical plants safer. There are few steps the government could take that would do more to protect Americans.

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